

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

For the past few years, Republicans have been wholly obsessed with schools. This isn't new — the debate over education reform stretches all the way back [to Ronald Reagan](#) — but it is newly, and intensely, focused on an entirely different set of priorities. For decades, both Democrats and Republicans viewed public [education performance](#) as a key harbinger of [America's global standing](#), but that changed as the GOP lurched to the populist right. By the beginning of 2021, Republicans had come to view public education as a leftist cult aiming to “indoctrinate” children by acknowledging the existence of LGBTQ+ people or the long history of white supremacy in America. It poses an existential threat to their conservative way of life, and so it must be defeated. (To state the obvious: If your political party dies because children learn facts at school, school is not the problem.)

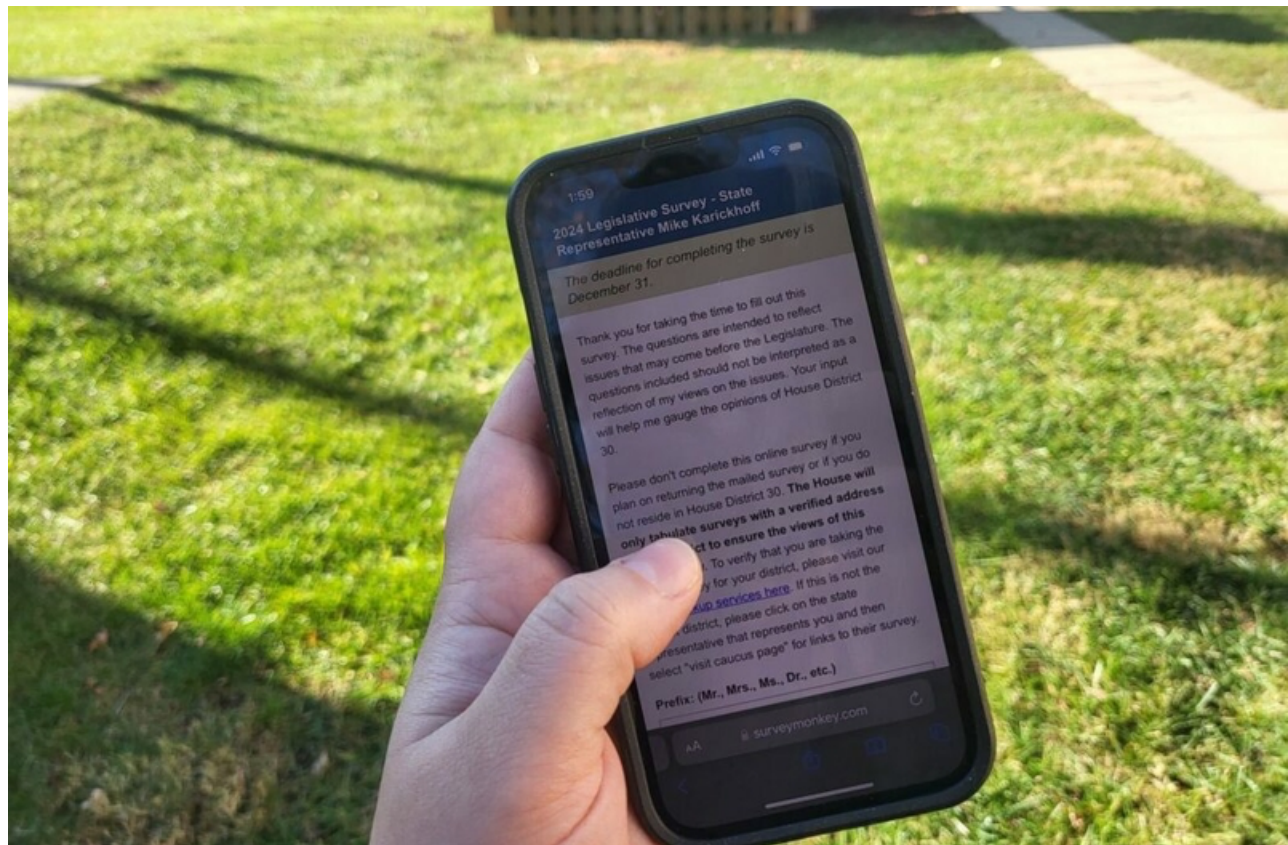
Thus began the onslaught. Since January 2021, lawmakers [in 28 states](#) have passed at least 71 bills restricting what teachers and students can say, do, and read at school. Some deal with curriculum, banning critical race theory (a college-level construct that is not a regular part of K-12 subject matter) or “divisive topics,” an intentionally vague term that can include race, gender, sexuality, or anything that might offend anyone on any given day. Others have nothing to do with education at all, like laws stating that school employees are not required to use students' preferred pronouns. All of them are purely ideological and designed with one goal: To bend an apolitical system to the will of a political party.



The Big Takeaway

Your view of this depends a lot on your politics. More than 70% of Democrats [believe K-12 schools](#) have a positive effect on the country, compared to just 37% of Republicans. The parties are even more divided on the societal impact of [higher education](#) — 76% of Democrats believe colleges and universities are a benefit to the country; 76% of Republicans view them negatively.

It's a self-sustaining (and toxic) system, in which GOP voters prioritize the culture wars highlighted by Republican lawmakers, who can't move on from the culture wars once voters buy into them. And so the battles wage on. In Indiana, Republicans appear to be girding for more school fights in the upcoming legislative session, according to [an Indiana Capital Chronicle review](#) of survey questions used by lawmakers to gather feedback from constituents.



"Do u like school? Text me back."

(Photo by Whitney Downard/Indiana Capital Chronicle)

First, a disclaimer: The review, which focused on a random sampling of 113 questions from 58 surveys, can't conclude definitively whether a lawmaker favors

a specific policy. (The review is not a psychic, for one thing.) Republican leaders said they do not coordinate survey questions or track what members ask, and each survey specifically states that the inclusion of a question doesn't mean that a lawmaker would support or oppose a related bill.

But the questions *do* indicate what they're thinking most about. And for now, Republicans are laser-focused on schools. Education was far and away the most popular survey topic, particularly an ongoing push to “reinvent high school” by adding more work-based learning. GOP lawmakers had pitched that as a way to improve the state's college-going and credentialing rates, [which Democrats said](#) would be better served by providing additional resources to existing career and technical education programs than by creating a new system with murky guidelines and accountability measures. The bill passed anyway.

On surveys, Republicans asked constituents to weigh in on the details, like whether to expand youth apprenticeship opportunities or change graduation requirements. Some also asked for broad views on the “overall adequacy” of the K-12 education system. Only one of the reviewed GOP surveys asked whether third graders who do not meet reading requirements should be allowed to advance to fourth grade. That same question appeared on 10 of 15 Democratic surveys reviewed, which also asked constituents about a potential child care tax credit, paid family leave, and collective bargaining for educators.



Public school students in Arkansas will once again be allowed to access digital library materials this spring, ending a semester-long blackout enacted in response to a state law prohibiting “obscene” and “harmful” books for minors. [The policy](#), approved this year, bans anything that “depicts or describes” nudity and sexual conduct, among other things. Violations of the law — from “showing” a book to making it “available” — can result in criminal charges, [per the Arkansas Advocate](#).

The wording of the bill is just vague enough to allow overzealous prosecutors to charge librarians for just about anything. This is the point, of course, but it’s also a liability nightmare for school districts. An attorney said as much this fall, advising the Pulaski County Special School District to err on the side of safety by withdrawing from a [tech card program](#) that allowed students to access digital materials from the Central Arkansas Library System.

There was, probably, nothing particularly racy in the catalog — the program focuses specifically on “recommended resources divided by grade level for research, homework help, and more” — but the online portal does not have “a way to filter search results and access to particular material,” so there was no way to be totally sure, a spokeswoman said in November. By then, a federal judge had placed the law on hold pending the outcome of a lawsuit challenging its constitutionality.

District officials reversed course this week, announcing that students could regain access to the system when school reconvenes after winter break — but only if their parents approve. By Thursday afternoon, 446 parents had opted in, according to data from the district.



Lots of pending applications in there!
(Photo by Kyle Phillips/For Oklahoma Voice)

Millions of federal education dollars remain in limbo for Oklahoma school districts thanks to processing delays at the state Department of Education, [the Oklahoma Voice reported](#). Nearly three-fourths of districts are still waiting for the department to sign off on federal spending plans, which must be approved by the state before being submitted to — and reimbursed by — the federal government.

The spending plans cover crucial expenditures, from salaries to student resources, and are typically approved quickly. Midwest City-Del City Public Schools, for example, usually receives approval by the end of September, according to superintendent Rick Cobb. This year it took until Dec. 12.

“Here we are in December, and we haven’t received any of those reimbursements,” he said. “For a district like Mid-Del, that means that we are waiting on millions and millions of dollars.”

By Dec. 8, the department had approved only about half of applications, according to an internal memo. The document attributed the delay to a new “multi-tiered system of application review,” designed to “ensure that taxpayer

funds are used appropriately, and to shield school districts from inadvertently breaking the law.” District officials took a different view, describing the process as “particularly frustrating and slow” in a survey administered by the Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administration.

State officials dismissed the criticism. Because what else do you *expect* from the *liberal education establishment*?

“It is not surprising that the most liberal education group only polled a third of [districts], presumably the most left-leaning, in a pathetic attempt to shame OSDE and [State Superintendent Ryan] Walters,” a spokesman said in a statement.

It was a voluntary survey about federal funding — not politics, according to Pam Deering, the council’s executive director.

“Not everything is a political issue,” she said. “And this in this case, this is truly just a business issue and the need for schools to be better served.”

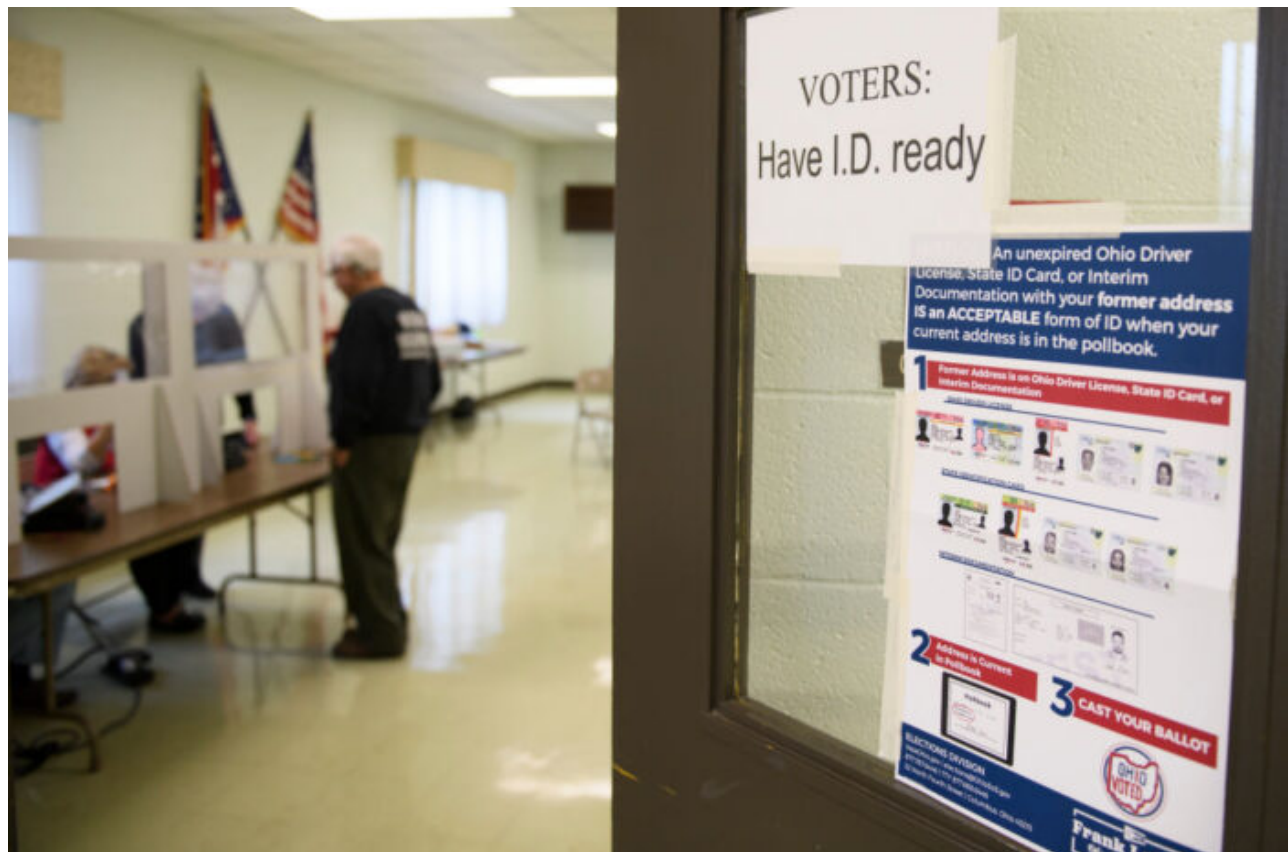
Most things, though: [Alabama public K-12 schools receive overall grade of B on state report cards](#) ... [Alaska Gov. Dunleavy’s budget has millions for education, but no increase to funding per student](#) ... [State orders Florida Atlantic University to restart presidential search after investigation](#) ... [As Ivy presidents falter under pressure, LSU’s president has different approach to campus speech](#) ... [Michigan State University to release thousands of Nassar documents, Nessel reopens investigation](#) ... [Anti-hunger advocates have a new focus in New Hampshire: the school breakfast](#) ... [New Hampshire asks court to freeze its sweeping education funding ruling, pending appeals](#) ... [New Jersey bill to limit virtual instruction stalls amid surprise opposition](#) ... [New Mexico Public Education Department asks lawmakers for \\$4.4B](#) ... [LGBTQ+ advocacy groups file Title IX complaint against North Carolina school district](#) ... [Lee Roberts named interim chancellor at UNC-Chapel Hill](#) ... [Smart money: Study says more money for public schools is good for the Ohio economy](#) ... [Texas’ debate over school chaplains escalates school board culture wars](#) ... [Virginia Supreme Court backs fired teacher who refused to use transgender student’s pronouns](#) ... [Researchers look at how to help more community college students gain four-year degrees](#) ... [Flagship public universities likely to cut more humanities, staff — especially in rural states](#)



State of Our Democracy

The Kansas Supreme Court on Friday ruled that voting rights advocacy groups have the right to challenge a 2021 law that criminalized appearing or behaving like an election official, reversing a [lower court](#) decision, [per the Kansas Reflector](#). The opinion, penned by Justice Caleb Stegall, framed voting rights as a form of free speech protected by the U.S. Constitution as an “essential, fundamental principle of American government.”

“We are cognizant — and wary — of recent government efforts to expand the scope of fraudulent speech to include speech the government, in its judgment, determines is simply false or misleading in some fashion,” Stegall wrote.



A felony charge for all of you!
(Photo by Jeff Swensen/Getty Images)

The decision clears the way for voting rights groups to proceed with a [pending lawsuit](#) against the policy, which had a chilling effect on advocacy efforts across the state, according to Davis Hammet, founder and executive director of Loud Light, which hasn’t registered voters since the law went into effect for fear of being charged with a felony. The year before that, they’d signed up nearly 10,000

new voters, he said.

“In 2020, we were sort of running at full force,” he said. “And then we had to stop.”

Kansas Republicans approved the law after the 2020 election under the guise of cracking down on widespread election fraud, which did not occur during the 2020 election [in Kansas](#) (or [anywhere else](#)). In addition to authorizing felony charges for anyone who has “the appearance” of an election official (...khakis?) or does something to make someone else believe they *are* an election official (...voting?), the law limited delivery options for absentee ballots and required election officials (regardless of “appearance”) to confirm signatures on advance ballots match those on file with the county.

That is a lot of things. Election officials and advocacy groups had tried to explain that to Republicans, only to be gaslit into believing their fears were unfounded. The high court’s decision proves they were right to be concerned, Hammet said.

“Telling us that we have no reason to be afraid, that we’re crazy, that there’s no threat of registering to vote,” Hammet said. “And today in an opinion issued unanimously by the Supreme Court and written by the most conservative justice on the Supreme Court, they said, ‘You’re not crazy. There is a very real fear of you facing felony charges for going out and registering to vote.’”

So there: [Idaho open primary ballot initiative reaches 50,000 signature milestone](#) ... [‘On the tip of the spear,’ Thayer will stay active in Kentucky GOP politics, see what universe ‘brings me’](#) ... [5th Circuit denies Louisiana’s appeal in congressional redistricting case](#) ... [Republican leaders testify in court about what they knew about Michigan 2020 fake elector plan](#) ... [Court of Appeals rules Trump can stay on Michigan’s primary ballot, appeal planned](#) ... [Public-sector unions spend more on politics in Minnesota than in nearly any other state](#) ... [Rudy Giuliani lawyer shifts blame to St. Louis-based Gateway Pundit in defamation case](#) ... [U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto \(D-Nevada\) sounds alarm over ‘far-right’ Supreme Court taking on abortion pill case](#) ... [Oregon Supreme Court weighs arguments from senators seeking to run for reelection](#) ... [We ranked Texas House members along the ideological spectrum based on their 2023 votes](#) ... [Texas Supreme Court declines to revive billionaire’s defamation lawsuit against Beto O’Rourke](#)



From The Newsrooms

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One Last Thing

Bradley Cooper [bans chairs from the sets of his movies](#). If people want to sit, they're free to pull up an apple box.

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